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The New Genealogy

ADDRESS

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AT THE

SIXTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

New England Historic Genealogical Society

FORD HALL, BOSTON

OCTOBER 22, 1909

BY

CHARLES KNOWLES BOLTON

TREASURER OF THE SOCIETY

NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

ANNIVERSARY

BOSTON

1910

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Charles Knowles Bolton.
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IN our many activities it behooves us not to forget that this Society stands for the study of genealogy. We live in a period and in a city crowded with diversified interests. If, therefore, we are to be effective, we must not forget to do one thing well. This one thing, I think you will all agree, is in our case the proper study of family history. To make genealogy worth while it must be respected of all men and must be allied in the world's work in which all men are engaged. This is not so difficult when we consider that genealogy touches life in its most momentous relations.

In looking back over our sixty-five years of successful effort there comes to us a feeling of satisfaction. We see evidences everywhere that our work has been useful in the community, yes, useful far beyond the bounds of New England. You have heard, and you will hear again this evening, the details of a society's struggle and growth. We are here to commemorate the self-sacrifice and the devotion of men whose memories are dear to this Society. But in commemorating the past we, while we linger here together, must not forget to lay sure foundations for a greater future.

I have said that genealogy touches life in its most momentous relations. Why, then, does not our subject appeal more strongly to scholars? Why is it not more often called a science? I think we can answer this by saying that genealogy, as it is customarily studied or developed, does not closely ally itself with other fields of serious research. In this, genealogy is weak. If it is to receive honor from the historian, the anthropologist, or the sociologist, it must contribute something to the sciences into which these men delve. For every true science does contribute to every other true science. Genealogy has done much to make people happy, a little perhaps to make people better. But in so far as it merely contributes to vanity and self-satisfaction, it is unworthy to rank as a science.

Our subject comes nearest to doing its duty worthily in its alliance with history. A few family books tell of political events contemporary with the lives depicted, although too often they give much space to descriptions of wars and to the parts played in them by the members of the family. Did these soldiers never have political views? Were their lives never influenced by current events, by an inflated currency, a shortage in the bread supply, a scarcity of maid servants, or if these events are not enough, by the acts, outrageous or otherwise, of the governor of a colony or of a king across the water? Does our genealogist never say that in such a year Thomson's Seasons or Addison's Spectator first was discussed at the village lyceum or sewing circle, and that his family led in the discussion? A large library frequently receives books and newspapers of early

date which bear familiar names written on the fly leaf or margin. Our ancestors, therefore, did have their books and papers. Does a genealogy mention what books long-ago members of the family owned, or read as they sat about the hearth in the fitful light of evening? Here are subjects for research: "Titles of early books and by whom owned;" "Titles of early newspapers and their subscribers." Shall we not some day find a great-great-grandson who will take more pride in the fact that his log-cabin ancestor owned a copy of *Paradise Lost* than that he fought at *Louisburg*?

It would be of value to the student if he could find in a genealogy much about early customs and methods of work. Farming out the paupers, paying the minister in produce, co-operation in building and in reaping, the work of the middle man in buying and selling cattle—these are subjects on which family papers throw light. To the student of economics they are of value. If he finds his facts summarized in a family history and is not forced to search for them himself, genealogical study has become the handmaid of economics, and is a science.

In very few of our volumes have I seen any statement in regard to the domestic life of the people who are recorded in the family book. The average reader to-day does not stop to think that *Jeremiah* and *Samantha*, *Seaborn* and *Mindwell* settled down to married life with corn-meal instead of white flour, pork instead of beef, cider instead of coffee, and the all-useful knife instead of a fork. Does a genealogy mention under the proper generation the coming into use of white sugar, the introduction of the Irish potato, the stove and the carriage, or the craze for the growing of flax and the founding of the Boston spinning school? These events influenced the lives of our ancestors. In short, are we genealogists writing the lives of people or are we copying records?

At a certain point in town records we find families naming their children *Horatio* or *Horatio Nelson*, and at another time *George* or *Lafayette* or *Wellington*. I wonder if any one has made a study of events as shadowed in the naming of children. This would ally genealogy with history. Perhaps it would show, also, that some among the old Puritans had their heroes of renown.

Genealogy again owes a debt to anthropology and to sociology. What is the effect of environment on life? It is said that the second generation on American soil suffered from the struggle to subsist. That is, it was weaker and less well educated. The historian of a famous New England stock wrote that the men of this second generation, living in hardship and privation, all died early from the excessive use of alcoholic liquor. That author at least was frank in his desire to picture the life of his ancestors. But most of our family histories expect us to assume that we are reading the lives of the saints.

Speaking of saints reminds me of the religious life of long ago when men were fined in court for absence from divine service. The

people drove ten miles and remained all day. The horse-sheds were filled and the pews were crowded. Country life held young as well as old. How is it now? The horse-sheds are torn down and the pews are empty. Country life offers delight only to the city man with his Sunday paper and his automobile. Let the genealogist study his facts candidly, that he may decide what he thinks about the merits of the old days as compared with ours in their influence upon the life of the country.

But I must hurry on. The great contribution which we can make to science is along the line of heredity. Where so surely may the student expect to find his basic facts as in the family history? And yet the biographical dictionary is almost his sole reliance, although this source gives him a picked class only on which to base his conclusions. If he had half a dozen scientifically prepared genealogies, describing old stock, what a mine of information would be his! One good family, the Jonathan Edwards line, and several of a criminal bent, have been described in books, but not by a family historian. In order that we may write a pleasant genealogy are we to omit all that might aid the student of heredity? If your family is composed of saints, add to the study of saints by writing a scientific genealogy of them. If it is not, spare your parents, if you must be filial to the point of canonizing them, but do not canonize the whole family.

In the study of factors which go to make up environment there is comfort in the conclusion reached by Mendel, the great Austrian monk whose researches are now the only sure foundations which we have for the study of heredity. His disciple Bateson says that "whereas our experience of what constitutes the extremes of unfitness is fairly reliable and definite, so that society may work to eliminate the unfit strains," any attempt to distinguish certain strains as superior and to give special encouragement to them would be unsafe, since we have as yet so little to guide us in estimating the qualities for which society has or may have a use. So elusive is the origin of what we call genius!

Few books of the kind we have under review speak much of physical inheritances. At every point I find that scientists differ as to the significance of the facts thus far made available, perhaps because so little evidence is to be had. Do you find long lines of descent bearing light hair and blue eyes, with other lines of dark eyes and hair? In England the upper classes tend to light hair and eyes. Does it follow that as stock improves through several generations the color of hair and eyes tends to lighten? I fear no family history can tell us. Do certain diseases run in certain lines? The study of these presents a curious problem, since doctors of old had general expressions for troubles which we differentiate now by long Latin names. Is it not for us to furnish much of the material for which science calls in the further study of these problems?

In Bateson's work on Mendel's Principles of Heredity, published at Cambridge, England, this year, you will find a series of questions to be answered by a study of families. A man who is color-blind has, we will say, a normal sister who marries. It is said to be an even chance whether any of her children will be color-blind at all; but if they are, then the sons will be color-blind and normal in equal numbers, and her daughters will all be normal. Again, a color-blind man marries a normal woman and the children will show no trace of the defect. But if we reverse the conditions, and the man be normal and the wife color-blind, the sons will all be color-blind and the daughters, while all normal, will be capable of transmitting color-blindness to the next generation. When scientists are enunciating such theories is it not for us to apply them, to reaffirm what proves to be truth and to put a stop to error? The law of heredity laid down by Galton and partially confirmed by observation should interest every genealogist. He says that half of the sum of our inheritances is from our parents and one-fourth from our grandparents. Nevertheless, slight as the thread of descent becomes back of one's grandparents, a woolly head or a deformed hand may reappear in each generation for two centuries. This being true, we may with equal hope of success look for the persistence of a valuable inheritance through many generations. I have always felt that the Wolcott family, with its major-generals, its signer of the Declaration of Independence, its senators, and its governor in each generation, owes its success to one ancestral girl, Martha Pitkin, whose merits were so evident that her possible departure out of the Colony became, it is said, a matter of general concern.

This transmission of habits and mental endowments must prove of interest to every one of us. The Puritan is called sober-minded and hardy, the Scotchman witty and thrifty, the Irish emigrant adaptable and ambitious. These and other conceptions of race peculiarity seem sure. What, then, of the inheritance of the individual? It seems that the average family in England consists of about five children, although some statistics put the number as high as six. In families where there is abnormal ability the average number of children rises from six to seven. The same tendency to raise the average is observable in criminal stock also, showing that genius and degeneracy appear to be allied and that size of family may be significant. Has any genealogist ever found the average size of family in his book and then examined those children where the family group exceeds the normal to see whether the group tendency is towards genius or degeneracy?

Again, the oldest child has a much greater likelihood of a distinguished career than his brothers and sisters. Next to him in importance comes the youngest child. Is this theory, which is deduced from lives in the great English Dictionary of National Biography, true in New England? Yet again, the father and mother are by

some said to grow more alike in facial expression as they mature. This means approximation to a family type, tending it is said, toward the male characteristics. If so, should not the younger children, who are born of parents of converging type, carry on the family face more accurately than the older children? In other words, a composite of the faces of children born when their parents are mature will give the face that goes with the name. If this is true, we do not inherit equally from all the 16,000,000 ancestors of the Conquest period (presuming there were so many), and the family type like the race type is real and becomes of interest.

There are other interesting phases of genealogy. It is hardly customary to study closely the romantic side of marriage to ascertain evidence of social standing and family advance or decline. In the middle period of immigration where the foreign-born resident was so unusual that he had none of his kind in the neighborhood, marriage with a Yankee girl gave indication of the decline in the girl's family. Perhaps we may say to-day that she who marries a Portuguese or French Canadian emigrant is not of just the social station claimed for a farmer whose family have occupied the old mansion for several generations. Permanence of domicile, and to some extent the transmission of a trade from father to son, as President Eliot has pointed out, lead to a superior stock. And in confirmation of this we find that there is no lack of family pride in the make-up of the prosperous farmer.

Statistics seem to indicate that ability is democratic. It goes to the man who uses his hands almost as often as to the lawyer to bestow its laurels; oftener indeed to the farm than to the army or to the medical school. The two great sources of ability, says Havellock Ellis, have been the church and trade. What changes will our new environment bring forth? The church no longer seems to dominate the town, and trade, once the cherished vocation of the proud squire's younger son, is now less admired. Are the law and medicine to have their day in nurturing the world's leaders? We who are here this evening have a right to be interested in the distribution and inheritance of ability, for John Winthrop's company, with many others of our early ancestors, come from Norfolk and Suffolk, the east-county land of England, which has produced more great men than any other part of the British Isles.

In trying to set for ourselves a higher standard of genealogical excellence we do not forget the splendid work that has been done. It makes for accuracy and order. It makes for sound reasoning. It has raised up in every city and frontier town an eager advocate for the preservation of records, so that volumes that once lay neglected are now in good repair and secure against fire. The old house going to decay receives a new covering of shingles because a study of old records reveals its part in history. Genealogy brings back to the hill town the city daughter, reverencing the old surroundings and eager to save memorials of her ancestral days from destruction.

To know of right living in our ancestors encourages us to higher ideals. To learn of ancestral weakness or disease prepares us to work intelligently to overcome unfortunate inheritances. Genealogy as a science helps us, therefore, to help ourselves. But it must also aid workers in other fields of science to help the race to which we all belong.

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